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Viewing cable 09ISTANBUL73, TURKEY: SENATOR DURBIN PUSHES FOR HALKI OPENING

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- The middle box contains the header information that is associated with the cable. It includes information about the receiver(s) as well as a general subject.
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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
09ISTANBUL73	2009-02-23 13:57	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Consulate Istanbul

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SUBJECT: TURKEY: SENATOR DURBIN PUSHES FOR HALKI OPENING

Classified By: Consul General Sharon A. Wiener for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Senator Richard Durbin called on the

Ecumenical Patriarch during his February 20 trip to Istanbul following official meetings in Nicosia, Athens, and Ankara. Durbin and the Patriarch discussed solutions to Cyprus and the importance of Halki Seminary and a potential re-energizing of talks on opening the Seminary. While Durbin would like to include the Greek government in meetings on the topic in light of GOT comments on reciprocity on issues in Western Thrace, the Patriarch responded strongly and negatively to this suggestion - emphasizing that Halki is a Turkish institution. End Summary.

¶2. (C) The Patriarch thanked Senator Durbin for his visit and conveyed his best wishes for the new Administration, noting his confidence that the new President would have a fruitful tenure. Peace and stability are greatly needed in the world, he said, and some refer to President Obama as the "new Messiah." The Patriarch will be coming to the United States in October for an environmental symposium in Mississippi and would like to meet President Obama at that time.

¶3. (C) The Patriarch emphasized the importance of the Halki Seminary for the continuation of the Greek Orthodox Church in Turkey. If the Ecumenical Patriarchate were to leave its traditional home in Istanbul, he argued, the Russian Orthodox Church would pursue its ambition to take over the administration of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, making them leaders of the Orthodox Church. The Patriarchate "needs protection from being humiliated by Ankara and the ambitions of the Russians."

¶4. (C) Senator Durbin explained that he came to Turkey at the urging of his Greek American constituents. While in Ankara, he said he brought up the issue of the Halki Seminary in his meetings with President Gul, Deputy PM Cicek, and senior MFA officials, who all expressed an interest in resolving the issue, despite legal requirements that have impeded resolution to date. Durbin noted that these GOT officials explained that the rights of the Muslim minority in Greece are not being respected, pointing, as an example, to inequitable funding of minority schools in western Thrace and a cut-back in the number of Turkish-speaking teachers allowed to enter Greece to teach at these schools. While not expressly demanding a quid pro quo, GOT officials made clear that reciprocal action by Athens would go far in helping resolve this issue.

Engaging Civil Society on Cyprus

¶5. (C) Durbin expressed his hope about a Cyprus solution to the Patriarch, noting that it will take "God, luck, and hard work" for it to be successful. He commented on the positive responses he received from the Turkish-Cypriot leaders on Cyprus during his meetings, as well as from GOT officials, but the paradoxical gloomy perspective he heard from journalists and MPs in Ankara on the topic. The Patriarch responded that the Ecumenical Patriarchate's problems are directly related to Turkey's conflict with Cyprus.

¶6. (C) Durbin said he was surprised by the silence of civil society in Cyprus and elsewhere. Political figures made statements, he said, but there was a distinct silence from ordinary people. Durbin said he wanted to engage civil society to push for a solution, and suggested a religious reconciliation program in Cyprus. Endy Zemenides, staff aide to the Illinois State Treasurer, supported Durbin's statement, saying that more people-to-people contact would be worthwhile.

Patriarch Discourages GOG Presence at Halki Talks

¶7. (C) While the Patriarch posited that the GOT does not want to sit down to a discussion of problems with the Patriarchate, Durbin responded that the GOT officials with

whom he had met in Ankara said that they would like to do just that. He explained his plan to have someone from the Government of Greece (GOG) at the table as well, to start the conversation. The Patriarch emphatically stated that

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it would not be logical to connect the issues of the Muslim minority in Western Thrace and a mosque in Athens with the issues of the Patriarchate, nor involve the GOG with a discussion on Halki. "Even Erdogan called Halki a Turkish institution, and the Patriarchate is not a representative of the Greek government."

18. (C) Durbin said that, nonetheless, he wanted to explore all avenues in an effort to resolve the Halki issue and asked if the Patriarch would be able to recommend an appropriate GOG contact to meet with GOT MFA Deputy Undersecretary Haydar Berk. The Patriarch reiterated that he believed the GOT should meet solely with representatives of the Patriarchate on these issues.

19. (C) Comment: Immediately following his meeting with the Ecumenical Patriarch, Durbin called GOG FM Dora Bakoyannis to discuss the Halki Seminary. He reported that GOT officials had hinted at a willingness to do more on Halki, but said that this would be facilitated by progress on "Turkish teachers in Thrace," and asked what she could do. According to Durbin's staff, Bakoyannis said she was willing to meet at any time with GOT interlocutors on the issue. Durbin's staff also noted that the Turkish community in Thrace would like more daily Turkish language instruction in schools, and more local control over the hiring of teachers (who are employees of the Ministry of Education). Durbin called Berk following his discussion with the Patriarch and his call to Bakoyannis. Berk told Durbin he was pleased with the notion of energizing dialogue both with the Ecumenical Patriarch and with the GOG on these issues and would be willing to meet with the Patriarch himself on Halki and others issues of concern to the Church here in Turkey. As noted above, the Ecumenical Patriarch emphasized to Durbin that he is a Turkish citizen and that the issues of the Patriarchate and Halki Seminary should be resolved without regard to activities in neighboring countries. Thus, the question at hand is whether the GOT would view any development with the GOG in western Thrace as sufficient to move forward with opening Halki Seminary, subject to identifying a legal avenue that would comply with legislation on provision of religious education in Turkey. End Comment.

Wiener